

**GRAPHICS & STORY BY Shelley Russell** Special Projects Editor

Fast facts, innovative entries and easy-to-read articles make Wikipedia a popular site for students and professors alike. But when all is said and done, how accurate is the content?

Quality tests conducted by experts who reviewed articles from multiple online encyclopedias, including Encyclopedia Britannica and Microsoft Encarta, rated Wikipedia as an equal among its competitors.

Time Magazine reported that while the site is vandalized daily, repairs usually occur within minutes or hours by the site's wide pool of users, dedicated to protecting the content.

Founded in 1999 by Jimmy Wales, 39, Wikipedia has exploded with success, now boasting more than 600,000 articles in English, and more than 2 million total articles.

The site's free licensing agreement, allowing content to be copied or redistributed for both commercial and non-commercial use is a component that enhances the popularity of the project.

More recently, Wikipedia has been used as a public relations tool among institutions and organizations. While Elon University does have a Wikipedia entry, Dan Anderson, assistant vice president and director of University Relations, confirmed that University Relations is not responsible for the content about Elon.

"I do not think that Wikipedia is promotional in nature," Anderson said. "We do not use it to promote university programs, but we do like to keep it as an accurate source of information."

Anderson remembers correcting Elon's Wikipedia entry twice during the past few years, after he had been alerted of an error on the site.

Wales spoke at a conference in July 2005, about what he called an "unusual and chaotic" organization structure of the site. With millions of contributors and a standby crew of volunteer system administrators 24 hours a day, Wikipedia is more reliable than most people think.

Wales did acknowledge the inevitable mistakes on the site, but he also spoke of the extensive editing process and dialogue among anonymous users to get the facts right and confirm information with other sources.

While most users honor the valuable source of information, some users are disrespectful.

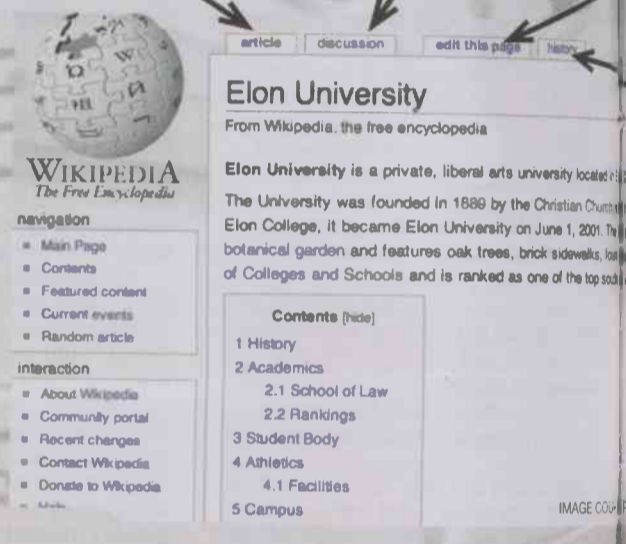
"The real struggle [with Wikipedia] is not between the right and the left," Wales said. "It is between the party of the thoughtful and the party of the jerks."

Wales still holds confidence in his creation, expanding the Wikimedia Foundation to include many other free form online resources for the online community.

# The World of Wiki

This tab provides the full article, as well as a table of contents. The text in blue allows readers easy access around the page, as well as links to related entries.

Comments are listed under this tab, involving criticisms of the entry, and suggestions for improvement. Any work on the site are also addressed with a fair rationale in this section.



## WHAT PROFESSORS HAVE TO SAY

### THE GOOD

Wikipedia makes information available to everyone, and although there are qualms with the idea of the site, Elon professors are not completely discounting the idea.

English Professor Paula Patch values the philosophy behind Wikipedia.

"The creation and consumption of information should be accessible to anyone and everyone," she said.

Dr. Jessie Moore likes the idea of Wikipedia because it is a good resource of introductory information on a topic. In addition, Wikipedia offers opportunities for others to review articles.

"The site provides useful tools to let people evaluate the page," Moore said.

In addition to the editing tools in the site, there is a discussion tab that allows users to voice opinions. Patch has her College Writing students engage in a project to assess the validity of Wikipedia, as well as recognize limits to the site.

"When students take the responsibility for learning in this way, they tend to retain the information better than when they're simply presented with one more rule," Patch said.

Professors have mixed feelings about citing Wikipedia, but most professors will not disagree with the idea that the site is a valuable preliminary information source.

**Consensus:** Wikipedia is a useful resource for general information that gives everyone access to a free online encyclopedia, but the information should not be used without verification from other credible sources.

### THE BAD

While the site may be helpful as a first look at a topic, there is no doubt that some major errors have been found on the site.

Wikipedia has posted articles announcing deaths of public figures who are still very much alive, and presented false or inaccurate information.

"The big problem with Wikipedia is the fact that anyone can upload and edit," communications professor David Copeland said. "Finding who has done the writing and editing is almost impossible."

While students are often met with frustration as professors repeat the familiar phrase: "Do not use Wikipedia for this project," professors have reasons for objecting to the site.

"At any time, any information within any entry may be inaccurate," English professor Paula Patch said. "This is most professors' biggest concern about Wikipedia."

Patch, along with other professors, have said that they use the site to gather information quickly about a new topic, but Patch remains well aware of the potential bias in Wikipedia articles.

She calls this "systematic bias," meaning that there is limitation in terms of information presented on the site, to issues that are either current, or chosen by Wikipedia writers because of a personal interest in the topic at hand.

**Consensus:** Although it may be a good source for fast information, no entry on the site should be read in confidence that it is completely accurate. Students should not rely on Wikipedia, as it is often difficult to identify the authors of each entry.

## EXPLORING WIKIPEDIA

**MYTH**  
Anyone can arbitrarily add articles to Wikipedia and the articles will remain on the site indefinitely.

**FACT**  
Newly-added articles appear on a new page, so site administrators are immediately aware of additions to the site. A "Wikipedia:Deletion" page allows users to post a discussion about whether or not to keep questionable articles on the site.